

This is a transcript of a news conference held January 27, 2015 that included three members of the governing Twelve Apostles and one woman leader of the Church. Leaders called for a “fairness for all” approach that balances religious freedom protections with reasonable safeguards for LGBT people — specifically in areas of housing, employment and public transportation, which are not available in many parts of the country.

<https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/publicstatement-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination>

Welcome and introductions by

Elder D. Todd Christofferson

Good morning and thank you for coming. I am Elder D. Todd Christofferson, and I’m here to introduce this news conference in my capacity as one of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Sister Neill Marriott, a member of the Young Women general presidency, and Elder Dallin H. Oaks and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, of the Twelve Apostles, will each take a few minutes to share their remarks.

Although the Church has many daily interactions with news media, we don’t hold news conferences very often – perhaps every year or two when we have a major announcement to make or something significant to say. And today, we do have something to say. We want to share with you our concerns about the increasing tensions and polarization between advocates of religious freedom on the one hand, and advocates of gay rights on the other.

To those who follow the Church closely and who are familiar with its teachings and positions on various social issues, it will be apparent that we are announcing no change in doctrine or Church teachings today. But we *are* suggesting a way forward in which those with different views on these complex issues can together seek for solutions that will be fair to everyone.

Following our remarks some of us will remain behind to allow you to ask any clarifying questions individually.

Sister Marriott, in her capacity as a member of the Church’s Public Affairs Committee, will begin, followed by Elders Oaks and Holland.

Sister Neill Marriott

My name is Neill Marriott and I’m pleased to be here today with Elders Christofferson, Oaks and Holland on behalf of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to share our views on the ongoing discussion of religious freedom. While we speak primarily to an American public, we include our own members who number 15 million worldwide, many of whom reside in other nations wrestling with the same issues we face here in the United States.

This nation is engaged in a great debate about marriage, family, individual conscience and collective rights and the place of religious freedom in our society. The eventual outcome of this

debate will influence to a large extent whether millions of people with diverse backgrounds and different views and values will live together in relative harmony for the foreseeable future.

In any democratic society, differences often lead to tensions. Such tensions are not to be feared unless they become so extreme that they threaten to tear apart the very fabric of society. While that's happened sometimes in our history, we're at our best as fellow citizens when the push-pull of different viewpoints, freely and thoroughly aired in national debate, lead ultimately to compromise and resolution and we move on as a nation, stronger than before.

The debate we speak of today is about how to affirm rights for some without taking away from the rights of others. On one side of the debate we have advocates of LGBT rights. This movement arose after centuries of ridicule, persecution and even violence against homosexuals. Ultimately, most of society recognized that such treatment was simply wrong, and that such basic human rights as securing a job or a place to live should not depend on a person's sexual orientation.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that sexual relations other than between a man and a woman who are married are contrary to the laws of God.

This commandment and doctrine comes from sacred scripture and we are not at liberty to change it. But, God is loving and merciful.

His heart reaches out to all of His children equally and He expects us to treat each other with love and fairness. There's ample evidence in the life of Jesus Christ to demonstrate that He stood firm for living the laws of God, yet reached out to those who had been marginalized even though He was criticized for doing so. Racial minorities, women, the elderly, people with physical or mental disabilities, and those with unpopular occupations all found empathy from the Savior of mankind.

It's for this reason that the Church has publicly favored laws and ordinances that protect LGBT people from discrimination in housing and employment.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks

Meanwhile, those who seek the protection of religious conscience and expression and the free exercise of their religion look with alarm at the steady erosion of treasured freedoms that are guaranteed in the United States Constitution. Since 1791 the guarantees of religious freedom embodied in the First Amendment have assured all citizens that they may hold whatever religious views they want, and that they are free to express and act on those beliefs so long as such actions do not endanger public health or safety. This is one of America's most cherished and defining freedoms. Yet today we see new examples of attacks on religious freedom with increasing frequency. Among them are these:

- In the state of California, two-dozen Christian student groups have been denied recognition because they require their own leaders to share their Christian beliefs. The

university system is forcing these groups to compromise their religious conscience if they want recognition for their clubs.

- Recently in one of America's largest cities, government lawyers subpoenaed the sermons and notes of pastors who opposed parts of a new law on religious grounds. These pastors faced not only intimidation, but also criminal prosecution for insisting that a new gay rights ordinance should be put to a vote of the people.
- Several years ago, an Olympic gold-medal gymnast—a Latter-day Saint, as it happened—had been selected to lead the American delegation to the Olympic Games. He was pressured to resign as the symbolic head of the team because gay rights advocates protested that he had supported Proposition 8 in California. Ironically, he was denied the same freedom of conscience that commentators demanded for the gay athletes he would symbolically represent.
- More recently, the head of a large American corporation was forced to resign from his position in a similar well-publicized backlash to his personal beliefs.

Sadly, the list is expanding. Accusations of bigotry toward people simply because they are motivated by their religious faith and conscience have a chilling effect on freedom of speech and public debate. When religious people are publicly intimidated, retaliated against, forced from employment or made to suffer personal loss because they have raised their voice in the public square, donated to a cause or participated in an election, our democracy is the loser. Such tactics are every bit as wrong as denying access to employment, housing or public services because of race or gender. Churches should stand on at least as strong a footing as any other entity when they enter the public square to participate in public policy debates.

It is one of today's great ironies that some people who have fought so hard for LGBT rights now try to deny the rights of others to disagree with their public policy proposals. The precious constitutional right of free speech does not exclude any individual or group, and a society is only truly free when it respects freedom of religious exercise, conscience and expression for everyone, including unpopular minorities.

Today, state legislatures across the nation are being asked to strengthen laws related to LGBT issues in the interest of ensuring fair access to housing and employment. The leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is on record as favoring such measures. At the same time, we urgently need laws that protect faith communities and individuals against discrimination and retaliation for claiming the core rights of free expression and religious practice that are at the heart of our identity as a nation and our legacy as citizens.

Because we are frequently asked for our position on these matters, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints asserts the following principles based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, and on fairness for all, including people of faith:

1. We claim for everyone the God-given and Constitutional right to live their faith according to the dictates of their own conscience, without harming the health or safety of others.
2. We acknowledge that the same freedom of conscience must apply to men and women everywhere to follow the religious faith of their choice, or none at all if they so choose.
3. We believe laws ought to be framed to achieve a balance in protecting the freedoms of all people while respecting those with differing values.
4. We reject persecution and retaliation of any kind, including persecution based on race, ethnicity, religious belief, economic circumstances or differences in gender or sexual orientation.

We call on local, state and the federal government to serve all of their people by passing legislation that protects vital religious freedoms for individuals, families, churches and other faith groups while also protecting the rights of our LGBT citizens in such areas as housing, employment and public accommodation in hotels, restaurants and transportation—protections which are not available in many parts of the country.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

Accommodating the rights of all people—including their religious rights—requires wisdom and judgment, compassion and fairness.

Politically, it certainly requires dedication to the highest level of statesmanship. Nothing is achieved if either side resorts to bullying, political point scoring or accusations of bigotry.

These are serious issues, and they require serious minds engaged in thoughtful, courteous discourse.

What kinds of religious rights are we talking about? To begin with, we refer to the constitutionally guaranteed right of religious communities to function according to the dictates of their faith. This includes their right to teach their beliefs from the pulpit and in church classrooms, share their views openly in the public square, select their own leaders, and minister to their members freely.

They include the right to use church properties in accordance with their beliefs without second-guessing from government. Of course such rights should never be exercised in ways that jeopardize public health or personal safety. They would embrace such matters as employment, honor code standards, and accreditation at church schools. That is because church-owned businesses or entities that are directly related to the purposes and functions of the church must have the same latitude in employment standards and practices as the church itself.

Certainly, religious rights must include a family's right to worship and conduct religious activities in the home as it sees fit, and for parents to teach their children according to their

religious values—recognizing that when children are old enough they will choose their own path.

In addition to institutional protections, individual people of faith must maintain their constitutional rights. This would include living in accordance with their deeply held religious beliefs, including choosing their profession or employment or serving in public office without intimidation, coercion or retaliation from another group. For example, a Latter-day Saint physician who objects to performing abortions or artificial insemination for a lesbian couple should not be forced against his or her conscience to do so, especially when others are readily available to perform that function. As another example, a neighborhood Catholic pharmacist, who declines to carry the “morning after” pill when large pharmacy chains readily offer that item, should likewise not be pressured into violating his or her conscience by bullying or boycotting.

With understanding and goodwill, including some give and take, none of these rights guaranteed to people of faith will encroach on the rights of gay men and women who wish to live their lives according to their own rights and principles.

Let us conclude by emphasizing this point as an alternative to the rhetoric and intolerance that for too long has come to characterize national debate on this matter. We must find ways to show respect for others whose beliefs, values and behaviors differ from ours while never being forced to deny or abandon our own beliefs, values and behaviors in the process. Every citizen’s rights are best guarded when each person and group guards for others those rights they wish guarded for themselves.

Today we have spelled out the Church’s concerns about the erosion of religious liberties, while at the same time calling for fairness for all people. We remind everyone of an official statement made by the Church in 1835, a statement formally incorporated into its sacred text known as the *Doctrine and Covenants*. The text of that scripture asserts both elements of the position we are taking today.

First, that all of us are accountable to God for the responsible exercise of our religious beliefs and we are calling on our fellow citizens to *be* responsible in exercising their religious freedom. Secondly, that scripture sets out the proper role of government in protecting the public interest without encroaching on free exercise, what it calls “the freedom of the soul.” Some 180 years later, the determination of

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be responsible citizens while also defending religious liberty remains undiminished.

Thank you for listening.