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Mormons soften language on gays

Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune | Nov. 15, 2010

A newly published compilation of guidelines used worldwide by leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has softened the language about gay Mormons.

The book, known as the Church Handbook of Instructions, lays out Mormon policies on everything from baptism to running a worship service to counseling troubled marriages.

The updated reference book, scheduled to be presented to thousands of Mormon leaders in a giant televised training session Nov. 13, will set the tone for church interactions for years to come.

The new handbook makes a clear distinction between same-sex orientation and behavior. It eliminates the suggestion, mentioned in a 2006 edition, that same-sex relationships ?distort loving relationships? and that gays should repent of their ?homosexual thoughts or feelings.?

It also says that celibate gay Mormons who are ?worthy and qualified in every other way? should be allowed to have ?callings,? or church assignments, and to participate fully in temple rituals.

The handbook simply repeats what top LDS leaders have been trying to say, but in more explicit terms that many members will understand, said David Pruden, president of Evergreen International, a support group that helps gay Mormons live by church standards.

Sometimes in the past, when a gay Mormon told his bishop he was struggling with same-sex feelings, the local leader would immediately call a ?disciplinary council,? Pruden said. ?They didn?t understand something that was foreign to them.?

These members were trying to be faithful to the church and looking for help, he said. Instead they were hurt and punished. The new tweaks, Pruden said, ?will bless people by making it easier for them to come forward.?

The changes are ?baby steps in the right direction,? said Mitch Mayne, an openly gay and active Mormon in the Bay Area. ?At least the handbook takes the damning terminology out of it.?

But as long as the church makes homosexuality into a ?subversive, taboo thing,? Mormon gays will have sex in parks and truck stops, he said. ?We wrap being gay in so much shame, and shame brings acting-out behavior.?

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