

Walsh: Gay support group still waits on LDS Church

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Gay life in Utah is a paradox.

Recognizing the sheer numbers of irritated and motivated citizen activists clustered along the Wasatch Front, the Human Rights Campaign is coming to town this weekend to train volunteers at "Camp Equality." Salt Lake City is one of 18 locations picked nationwide for "Year to Win."

"The bluest pocket within the reddest state that we call home, Salt Lake City, is really creating change and possibility," says Salt Lake City Democratic Rep. Christine Johnson.

And yet, Affirmation, a support group for still-faithful gay and lesbian Mormons, is scratching at South Temple's doors, begging to meet with someone, anyone. Attempts to meet have been scuttled twice by logistical problems.

"One thing we have control over, the other thing we don't," says Utah Pride Center Director Valerie Larabee, explaining the validation of one day, the rejection the next.

It's the contradiction of being gay in Utah. The state ranks 10th in the nation for the number of elected gay legislators. Salt Lake City is fifth-highest in the nation for the rate of gay parents raising children. State law prohibits gay marriage, but couples can register domestic partnerships at the city.

At the same time, from its Salt Lake City headquarters, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is mustering the faithful to amend California's constitution to ban gay marriage.

Recently, hopeful gay Mormons saw a sign of South Temple softening - Jeffrey Holland's article in *Ensign* magazine.

"In recent years, the Church's view towards gay and lesbian people has changed," said David Melson, Affirmation's senior assistant executive director.

But Affirmation's desperate news conference this week just brushed the edge of too much for a conservative religion organization that chafes at being prodded into doing anything. Affirmation members say they've documented 30 suicides of gay Mormons. They say any delay, no change in church training or policy, will only mean more.

A church spokesman called the news conference "public posturing."

"It appears from Affirmation's actions today that it has opted for a public rather than a private exchange," said Scott Trotter, a spokesman for the LDS Church.

Johnson, a lesbian, hopes the meeting will happen anyway. She left the LDS Church when she was 19.

"There is nothing that causes more inner conflict than loving a religion that doesn't allow you to be fully authentic," she says.

But Gary Watts is pessimistic. When his son came out to his devout Mormon parents in 1989, Gary and Millie Watts started their own search for a break in the church's hard anti-gay line. After years of meetings with church leaders high and low, after "just banging your head against the wall," the Watts gave up and abandoned their faith. Their children - heterosexual and homosexual - followed.

Change, Watts says, can only come from the First Presidency, not a "low-level bureaucrat."

"We were very faithful, devout Mormons. We would have done anything the church would have asked," he adds. "We're no longer loyal. Our entire family [has left the church]. And it's happening to family after family. The church seems willing to accept that collateral damage."

So, while HRC's progressive politics workshops go on, Affirmation's leaders will head home and wait for a phone call.

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