

## Is LDS Church taking a step back on gay issues?

Analysis » Some observers say Hafen's speech leads faithful in a new direction.

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LDS general authority Bruce C. Hafen's speech last week about homosexuality sounded like a throwback. He told those assembled at a conference for Mormons trying to "overcome" same-sex attraction that being gay is "not in your DNA." He talked about the 1970s, when psychology manuals listed homosexuality as a mental disorder and gay-rights activists were working just to get anti-sodomy laws off the books. Was Hafen speaking for himself or the church? Were LDS leaders backing away from statements that they "don't know" if a person is born gay? Has the church changed course? The church isn't saying yes, and it isn't saying no. But observers are.

"It was a big step backwards," said Gary Watts, a Provo physician who, for decades, has watched the church's position on homosexuality evolve. "The church has a long way to go to get into the 21st century. They're making incremental movements. What Hafen has done is take them back 25 years."

In the past decade, the church has moved away from 1970s teachings that emphasized psychosocial causes of homosexuality, including parenting, toward a "we don't know" approach -- not denying the possibility of biological factors. In a 2007 article in the LDS magazine *Ensign*, apostle Jeffrey R. Holland stressed that "no one," not parents nor people who experience same-sex attraction, should be blamed.

"The church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction," fellow apostle Dallin H. Oaks said in a 2006 interview posted on the church's Web site. "Those are scientific questions -- whether nature or nurture -- those are things the church doesn't have a position on."

Even then-President Gordon B. Hinckley, when asked on "Larry King Live" in 2004 whether people choose to be gay or are born that way, responded: "I don't know."

But Hafen, speaking at Evergreen International's 19th annual conference a week ago, went further in trying to explain the causes.

He told listeners -- many of them Latter-day Saints trying to heed church teachings not to act on homosexual feelings -- that they may not have "consciously chosen" to have same-sex attraction. But he dismissed the mainstream idea that sexual orientation is inborn and unalterable as an "untrue assumption."

Hafen suggested most lesbians were sexually abused as children and that gay men, during a crucial stage of puberty, may have become "fixated" on the notion they were gay.

"What he said was just flat wrong," said David Melson, executive director of Affirmation, a support group for gay and lesbian Mormons, many of whom have left the faith. "Scientific evidence has shown ... the factors that make one gay take place before birth."

Telling people who are gay or lesbian that, with enough faith, they can change their sexual orientation, Melson added, "borders on being cruel."

The Foundation for Reconciliation, a group that hopes to foster greater understanding between the LDS Church and the gay and transgender community, posted an online "First Aid Kit" for gay Mormons who were hurt by Hafen's remarks ([www.ldsapology.org/FirstAidKit.htm](http://www.ldsapology.org/FirstAidKit.htm)). They also requested a meeting with Hafen, a former dean of Brigham Young University's law school and a member of the church's First Quorum of the Seventy. Hafen has not responded.

"I was happy to see he had a lot of compassion" for people with same-sex attraction, said Peter Danzig, a Salt Lake City spokesman for the foundation. "But, on the other hand, I thought he probably didn't understand how hurtful some of this advice is going to be."

Contrary to what Hafen said, Danzig argued, many gay Mormons find "spiritual peace" when they accept their sexual orientation isn't going to change. They can choose to live by the church's rules about chastity -- no sexual acts outside of a heterosexual marriage -- and give up the inner turmoil caused by false hopes of becoming straight.

Hafen, whose speech was posted on the church's Web site ([www.ldsnewsroom.org](http://www.ldsnewsroom.org)) also pointed to the American Psychological Association's 1973 decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, saying it was based more on politics than science.

The "longstanding consensus" of the behavioral and social sciences, the APA stated in a resolution passed last month, is that homosexuality is a "normal and positive variation of human sexual orientation."

The measure advised mental health professionals against telling their clients they can change their sexual orientation through therapy or other treatments. No solid evidence exists that such efforts work, the APA concluded, and some studies suggest the potential for harm, including depression and suicidal tendencies. A task force reviewed 83 studies on sexual-orientation change conducted since 1960.

An LDS Church spokesman declined to say whether Hafen was speaking on behalf of the church or whether his remarks represent a shift in the faith's views. Scott Trotter also did not say whether the church believes homosexuality should still be considered a mental disorder.

"Elder Hafen's talk is self-explanatory," Trotter wrote via e-mail.

Watts, the Provo doctor, who has a gay son and a lesbian daughter among his six children, thinks the speech doesn't necessarily reflect a major policy change for the church as a whole. (Watts and his wife, Millie, led Family Fellowship, a group for LDS families with gay kids, for more than a decade.)

"It might just be Elder Hafen," he said.

Melson suggested Hafen is among LDS leaders who take a "more hard line" when it comes to homosexuality.

"There are a significant number of church leaders," Melson said, "who understand the scientific research, who are willing to listen to alternate views, who are a little bit more moderate in their statements."

Hafen also took a step back from declarations the church made in the wake of Proposition 8 -- the ballot measure it helped pass in California outlawing gay marriage in the Golden State -- that it does not oppose some rights for same-sex couples.

He suggested the law need only "tolerate" homosexual behavior not "endorse" it, which he said was accomplished when gay sex was decriminalized.

But, in a news release last November, the church said it does not object to rights for same-sex couples regarding hospitalization, medical care, fair housing and employment or probate rights.

Utah gay-rights supporters are pushing for precisely those kind of protections. Their bills fizzled in the 2009 Legislature but will return in 2010. Advocacy group Equality Utah has invited the LDS Church to join the so-called "Common Ground Initiative."

So far, the church has not responded.

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How Hafen's speech stacks up

Here's how statements made by Bruce C. Hafen, a member of the LDS First Quorum of the Seventy, last week compare with some made in 2006 by LDS apostle Dallin H. Oaks and a 2008 church statement.

Hafen » "Having same-gender attraction is not in your DNA."

Oaks » "The church does not have a position on the causes of any of these susceptibilities or inclinations, including those related to same-gender attraction. Those are scientific questions -- whether nature or nurture -- those are things the church doesn't have a position on."

Hafen » "Evidence that people have indeed changed [their sexual orientation] threatens the political agenda of the activists, because actual change disproves their claim that homosexuality is a fixed condition that deserves the same legal protections as those fixed conditions like race and gender."

Church statement » "The church does not object to rights for same-sex couples regarding hospitalization and medical care, fair housing and employment rights or probate rights."

Source: [www.ldsnewsroom.org](http://www.ldsnewsroom.org)