

Understanding the Handbook

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If there's one thing that virtually all Christians agree on, it's Jesus Christ's tender love of children. Both the Bible and Book of Mormon deliver touching accounts of His love for "little ones," blessing them and forbidding His disciples from keeping children from Him.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the family is revered and children are its centerpiece. Yet last week an instructional letter from Church leadership addressing the sensitive topic of how to respond to same-sex relationships sparked a wave of inquiries from Church members. Most of the questions were about children.

Because the letter was an instructional document to leadership throughout the world, and not a Church-wide announcement through LDS.org or through Church Public Affairs, there was no additional information or context on the usual Church websites. That prompted questions from many Church members, who were mostly reading media headlines portraying the instructions as a rejection of children and refusal to name babies. Members understandably had specific questions about how the announced change might affect their loved ones.

The episode demonstrates clearly the dangers of drawing conclusions based on incomplete news reports, tweets and Facebook posts without necessary context and accurate information. The Church quickly responded to many of those concerns with a video interview with Elder D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. By the end of the weekend, that interview had been viewed by millions. Today, a letter clarifying what the Handbook changes mean and do not mean has been posted on the primary Church website, LDS.org.

One difficulty was a general lack of understanding of the Handbook itself, which is a guide for lay leaders of the church in 30,000 congregations across the world. A purpose of the Handbook is to provide bishops and other leaders with a standard reference point when they make decisions. Because it is a policy and procedural manual, the Handbook is not written in language that is necessarily contextual or explanatory. Church leaders are encouraged to use the Handbook in conjunction with the guidance of the Holy Ghost. Sensitivity to individual circumstances is learned through the Spirit, Christ's teachings and example as found in the scriptures, from talks and teachings of General Authorities, and from the leaders' own experience and exposure to real-life situations. No handbook can answer every question or address every circumstance.

Here are the key points to understand as background to the recent changes and additions to the leaders' Handbook:

- It is not a sin simply to feel attraction to another person of the same sex. Some faithful members of the Church experience those attractions yet participate in the Church without breaking the Lord's commandments. They serve missions and attend the temple. The Church teaches its members to embrace these brothers and sisters and encourage them in their faithful lives in the Church.
- There is no change in the doctrinal position that sexual relations between people of the same sex are sinful.
- There is new information in the Handbook that addresses a narrow range of situations involving the children of same-sex couples.

With same-sex marriage now legal in the United States and some other nations, the Church felt the need specifically to address such marriages in the Handbook to draw a firm line and encourage consistency among local leaders. In particular, Church leaders are concerned for children—whether biologically born to one of the partners, adopted or medically conceived. In reality, very few same-sex couples would bring children for the formal Church ordinance of naming and blessing, since this creates a formal membership record. But Church leaders want to avoid putting little children in a potential tug-of-war between same-sex couples at home and teachings and activities at church.

This sensitivity to family circumstances is practiced elsewhere. For example, the Church doesn't baptize minor children without parental consent, even if the children want to be associated with their LDS friends. A married man or woman isn't baptized if the spouse objects. Missionaries don't proselytize in most Muslim countries or in Israel, where there are particular sensitivities with family. In some African and other nations where polygamy is practiced, anyone whose parents practice polygamy needs special permission for baptism so they know that a practice that is culturally acceptable for many in the region is not acceptable in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Of course, there are always situations that fall outside general guidelines and principles, which is why local leaders may ask for guidance from more senior leaders in particular cases where they may have questions.

The vast majority of Church members understand that there has been no doctrinal change with regard to LGBT issues. Church doctrine is consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. There is a strong tendency today for many to talk of Jesus Christ as if His teachings on love were somehow inconsistent with his teachings on divine commandments. Of course the Savior's love was never withheld from anyone and His words on the cross exemplify that. But, He also expressed love by teaching clear doctrine and standing firmly against sin with sometimes-tough lessons for which people rejected Him. That is where Church leaders stand today – holding firm to the doctrinal position of right and wrong, while extending love to all people. Church members who believe in modern prophets and apostles understand and appreciate the intent of their leaders to guide the Church through the complexities of diverse societies and rapidly changing social circumstances.