

LDS Church urges lawmaker compassion in addressing illegal immigration

By Peggy Fletcher Stack, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

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Amid an increasingly rancorous debate about immigration, LDS leaders have urged Utah representatives to be compassionate in their push for legal reforms.

"The basic message was that we need to step back, not be so reactive and let cooler heads prevail," said Rep. David Litvack, D-Salt Lake City, who met on Jan. 11 with LDS Apostle M. Russell Ballard and other church officials. "The anti-immigrant community has become hateful and vilifies all undocumented workers." The LDS leaders said, in essence, "We must remember that we are talking about human beings."

Litvack, House minority whip, considered that valuable advice for lawmakers who are considering a number of anti-immigration bills, including a push to eliminate in-state tuition for children of undocumented immigrants.

Though many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including presidential candidate Mitt Romney, take a hard-line view of any people in the country illegally, others believe kindness fits better with the church's beliefs about treating strangers as if they were Jesus himself. They say a compassionate stance also is less hypocritical for the church, whose early members were almost all immigrants. Today, many of Utah's estimated 100,000 undocumented immigrants likely are LDS.

The church remains neutral on immigration legislation, said spokesman Scott Trotter, but it does send missionaries among undocumented immigrants, baptizing many of them without ever asking about their status. It also allows them to go to the temple and on missions.

"The blessings of the [LDS] Church are available to anyone who qualifies for and accepts the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Trotter said. "Federal law allows undocumented persons to provide volunteer church service, including missionary service, within the United States."

The church has more than 500 foreign-language units in the U.S., made up almost entirely of first-generation immigrants.

"I look back on dozens of people we taught and baptized, and I personally can't think of one who did have legal status," said Rebecca van Uitert, an LDS immigration attorney in New York City who was a Spanish-speaking Mormon missionary in rural southern California from 1998 to 2000. "There were even some undocumented bishops and stake presidents. Basically, everyone was undocumented."

Last fall, van Uitert, who also does pro bono legal services through the Catholic Charities, St. John's University Undocumented Immigrant Minors Project, compared Catholic and Mormon social thought relating to immigration. The Catholic Church has built its defense of immigration reform on Catholic teachings about human dignity.

Mormons go even further, she wrote in the *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies*. "LDS believe that all humans have the capacity not only to return to live with God, but also to become like God someday."

The church's unique scripture, the Book of Mormon, preaches "equality and justice," van Uitert wrote. "It also teaches that the poor should not be harshly judged for the state of poverty in which they live. Rather, they should be extended unconditional charity."

Mormons who argue that undocumented workers should not be rewarded for breaking the law often cite the church's 12th Article of Faith, which says members believe in obeying the law.

But van Uitert believes the command to "love your neighbor" should outweigh the failure to get the right papers.

"If people are so worried about misdemeanors, why aren't we raiding the homes

of traffic violators?" she said Wednesday. "This is not just about legality; it's about race and cultural issues."

That's been the case since the U.S. government began limiting immigration in the late 19th century.

When country quotas were first established, they were "blatantly racist," said Kaimipono Wenger, a Mormon professor who teaches at the Thomas Jefferson Law School in San Diego. "They were trying to keep out the Chinese, the Mexicans and Asians of any sort."

Early in his career, Wenger worked on a court case, *Beharry v. Reno*, and argued successfully that no one should be deported without a hearing to determine the affect it would have on families, particularly minor children. The verdict was overturned on appeal.

"I would be thrilled to see the LDS Church taking a larger role in protecting immigrant families," he said. "Given our doctrinal beliefs about the eternal nature of the family, we should not support the breaking up of families with deportation."

Wenger hopes the LDS Church will codify its nebulous "don't ask, don't tell" practice so that Mormons who oppose immigration would reconsider their position. He also wishes the church would publicly state that being an undocumented immigrant "has no affect on a person's standing with God."

Mormons were "pioneers on immigration in the 19th century," he said. "Why not be pioneers now?"

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* **SB97** would create an immigration task force made up of 11 lawmakers to review and make recommendations on current and proposed federal and state laws and policies that relate to illegal immigration.

* **HB241** would repeal a law that allows eligible undocumented students to pay in-state college tuition at state universities and colleges.

* **HB237** would allow state or local law enforcement officers to perform certain functions of a U.S. immigration agent, such as arrest undocumented immigrants.

Source: *The Salt Lake Tribune*