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Mormon gays tread lightly in latest bid for acceptance

Meeting with church leaders called historic

By Bonnie Miller Rubin

Chicago Tribune reporter

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SALT LAKE CITY — When he was 16, David Nielson divulged his attraction to men, knowing it could cost him the two great pillars of his life: his parents and his Mormon faith.

"When you come out, the philosophy here has always been, 'Say goodbye to your family because they will say goodbye to you,' " said the postal worker, 24. "But, I believe—and hope—that the climate is finally changing."

While the church still teaches that gay sex is a sin and actively opposes gay marriage—which it will do from pulpits across California this Sunday—a first-ever meeting between Mormon officials and members of an advocacy group for non-straight Mormons might suggest that such acceptance is more than wishful thinking.

Affirmation, which has more than 2,000 gay, lesbian and transgender members worldwide, officially requested the meeting earlier this year, shortly after Thomas Monson became president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Kim Farah, a representative for the church, confirmed the appointment with LDS Family Service Commissioner Fred Riley and Harold Brown of LDS Social Services, but declined to comment further.

Duane Jennings, president of Affirmation's Salt Lake City chapter, called the conversation "historic."

"With the new president, it just seemed like an opportunity for a new beginning," he said.

The group's leaders don't expect any doctrine change to come out of the meeting, set for August, but they hope it will be a first step toward mutual understanding and healing.

Over breakfast on a recent Sunday morning, Jennings and Nielson, also an Affirmation activist, cite

examples of the church's intolerance toward homosexuality, including expulsion from church-owned Brigham Young University, where Affirmation was founded in 1977.

The 13.1 million-member denomination has also had a long history of supporting "pro-family" politics. The official LDS position is that it is permissible to be homosexual as long as one is celibate, the same standard of morality used for unmarried heterosexual members.

Most recently, the church has joined other evangelical congregations to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would recognize only marriages between a man and woman, reversing a recent California Supreme Court decision.

A statement to be read in California churches on Sunday declares Mormon teachings "on this moral issue are unequivocal."

The proclamation, signed by Monson and two other church leaders, concludes: "We ask that you do all you can to support the ... amendment by donating of your means and your time ... to preserve this sacred institution."

This campaign will not derail the August meeting, Dave Melson, Affirmation's assistant executive director, said Friday.

"From our side, this will not change things. ... It is disappointing, but we are going in with an open mind," said Melson, who will be at the table in August. "We are taking the church at its word, that they are still planning to meet in good faith."

However, one look at Affirmation's Web site reveals that not all gay Mormons want to extend an olive branch.

"It's a total waste of time," posted one anonymous member.

Still, others embraced the upcoming forum: "This meeting is past-due. ... but if we want them to cease persecuting us ... then we have to come to them and show them that we are as God intended."

Nielson is among those who hope for a productive conversation—especially if it helps reduce suicide in Utah. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for young males in Utah, according to state health data. Both Nielson and Jennings suggested gay Mormons were over-represented in that death toll.

Salt Lake City has a vibrant gay community—including a Gay Pride Parade, held earlier this month, which draws more participants than the same event in Las Vegas. But the rest of the state can be "very nasty," Nielson said.

Active participation in the church was a way of life for his family, he said. When he was a teen, he recalled being chased with scissors by peers in the congregation, who exhorted him to stop being so "different."

But the real blow came when he was denied a chance to serve on a mission, a rite of passage for Mormon men and women.

Ironically, Nielson's mother has converted to Catholicism; his father is still an LDS member but has "distanced" himself. Only Nielson has stayed.

There are so many aspects of the church that he loves—the music, emphasis on education, a chance to serve and share one's talents with others—that he accepts the discomfort.

"I have to generate my own welcomeness," he admitted. "If I didn't know this is the true church, I would have left a long time ago."
